PAMPHLETS.
d Series.
acher, Leon Simon
S. Landman.
No. 6.

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MOSES

by

Achad ha-Am

(Translated by Leon Simon)

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Published by "The Zionist,"
4 King's Bench Walk, Temple, London, E.C.

1917.

[Price 4d.; Post Free, 4½d.]

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MOSES

(1904)

THE influence of great men on the history of the human race is a subject of much discussion among philosophers. Some maintain that the great men create history, and the masses are nothing more than the material on which they work. Others assert that the masses are the moving force, and the great men of every age are only inevitable products of that age and its conditions. Such discussions make one reflect on the tendency of philosophers to shut their eyes to what lies in front of them, and to seek by roundabout paths what is really so near. Surely it is obvious that the real great men of history, the men, that is, who have become forces in the life of humanity, are not actual, concrete persons who existed in a certain age. There is not a single great man in history of whom the popular fancy has not drawn a picture entirely different from the actual man ; and it is this imaginary conception, created by the masses to suit their needs and their inclinations, that is the real great man, exerting an influence which abides in some cases for thousands of years—this, and not the concrete original, who lived a short space in the actual world, and was never seen by the masses in his true likeness.

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And so it is when learned scholars burrow in the dust of ancient books and manuscripts, in order to raise the great men of history from the grave in their true shapes ; believing the while that they are sacrificing their eyesight for the sake of " historical truth." It is borne in on me that these scholars have a tendency to overestimate the value of their discoveries, and will not appreciate the simple fact that not every archæological truth is also an historical truth. Historical truth is that, and that alone, which reveals the forces that go to mould the social life of mankind. Every man who leaves a perceptible mark on that life, though he may be a purely imaginary figure, is a real historical force ; his existence is an historical truth. And on the other hand, every man who has left no impress on the general course of life, be his concrete existence at a particular time never so indisputable, is only one of the million : and the truth contained in the statement that such an one existed is a merely literal truth, which makes absolutely no difference, and is therefore, in the historical sense, no truth at all. Goethe's Werther, for instance, was a pure fiction ; but his influence on that generation was so immense as to cause a large number of suicides : and therefore he is, in the historical sense, much more truly a real person than this or that actual German of the same period, who lived an actual concrete life, and died, and was forgotten, and became as though he had never been. Hence I do not grow enthusiastic when the drag-net of scholarship hauls up some new " truth " about a great man of the past ; when it is proved by the most convincing evidence that some national hero, who lives on in the hearts of his people, and influences their development, never existed, or was something absolutely unlike the popular picture of him. On such occasions I tell myself : all this is very fine and very good, and certainly this " truth " will erase or alter a paragraph of a chapter in the book of archæology ; but it will not make history erase the name of its hero,

or change its attitude towards him, because real history has no concern with so-and-so who is dead, and who was never seen in that form by the nation at large, but only by antiquarians ; its concern is only with the living hero, whose image is graven in the hearts of men, who has become a force in human life. And what cares history whether this force was at one time a walking and talking biped, or whether it was never anything but a creature of the imagination, labelled with the name of some concrete man ? In either case history is certain about his existence, because history feels his effects.

And so when I read the Haggadah on the eve of Passover, and the spirit of Moses the son of Amram, that supremest of heroes, who stands like a pillar of light on the threshold of our history, hovers before me and lifts me out of this nether world, I am quite oblivious of all the doubts and questions propounded by non-Jewish critics. I care not whether this man Moses really existed ; whether his life and his activity really corresponded to our traditional account of him ; whether he was really the saviour of Israel and gave his people the Law in the form in which it is preserved among us ; and so forth. I have one short and simple answer for all these conundrums. This Moses, I say, this man of old time, whose existence and character you are trying to elucidate, matters to nobody but scholars like you. We have another Moses of our own, whose image has been enshrined in the hearts of the Jewish people for generations, and whose influence on our national life has never ceased from ancient times till the present day. The existence of this Moses, as an historical fact, depends in no way on your investigations. For even if you succeeded in demonstrating conclusively that the man Moses never existed, or that he was not such a man as we supposed, you would not thereby detract one jot from the historical reality of the ideal Moses—the Moses who has been our leader not only for forty years in the wilderness of Sinai,

but for thousands of years in all the wildernesses in which we have wandered since the Exodus.

And it is not only the existence of this Moses that is clear and indisputable to me. His character is equally plain, and is not liable to be altered by any archæological discovery. This ideal—I reason—has been created in the spirit of the Jewish people ; and the creator creates in his own image. These ideal figures, into which a nation breathes its most intense aspirations, seem to be fashioned automatically, without conscious purpose ; and therefore, though they cannot, of course, escape a certain superfluous and inharmonious embroidery, and though we cannot insist that every detail shall be organically related to the central idea, yet the picture as a whole, if we look at its broad outlines, does always represent that idea which is the cause of its existence, and as it were the seed from which the whole tree has grown.

I take, therefore, a comprehensive view of the whole range of tradition about Moses, and ask myself first of all: What essentially is Moses? In other words, what manner of thing is the national ideal which has its embodiment in Moses? There are heroes and heroes—heroes of war, heroes of thought, and so forth ; and when we examine an ideal picture we must first be clear as to the essential nature of the ideal which the artist had in his mind and attempted to portray.

And as I look at the figure of Moses I go on to ask : Was he a military hero?

No ! The whole canvas betrays no hint of physical force. We never find Moses at the head of an army, performing feats of valour against the enemy. Only once do we see him on the battlefield, in the battle with Amalek ; and there he simply stands and watches the course of the fighting, helping the army of Israel by his *moral* strength, but taking no part in the actual battle.

Again : Was he a statesman ?

Again, no! When he had to confront Pharaoh and discuss questions of politics with him, he was helpless without his brother Aaron, his mouthpiece.

Was he, then, a lawgiver?

Once more, no! Every lawgiver makes laws for his own age, with a view to the particular needs of that time and that place in which he and his people live. But Moses made laws for the future, for a generation that did not yet exist, and a country not yet conquered; and tradition has made no secret of the fact that many laws attributed to Moses only came into force after several generations, while others have never been put into practice at all.

What, then, was Moses?

Tradition answers in the most explicit terms: "There arose not a *Prophet* since in Israel like unto Moses." This, then, is what Moses was: a Prophet. But he was different from the other Prophets, whose appearance in our history, as a specific type, dates only from the period of the monarchy. He was, as later generations learned to call him, "the lord of the Prophets," that is, the ideal archetype of Hebrew prophecy in the purest and most exalted sense of the word.

Again I take a comprehensive glance at what reading and reflection have taught me about the nature of Hebrew prophecy, and try to define its essential characteristics.

The Prophet has two fundamental qualities, which distinguish him from the rest of mankind. First, he is *a man of truth*. He sees life as it is, with a view unwarped by subjective feelings; and he tells you what he sees just as he sees it, unaffected by irrelevant considerations. He tells the truth not because he wishes to tell the truth, not because he has convinced himself, after inquiry, that such is his duty, but because he needs must, because truth-telling is a special characteristic of his genius—a characteristic of which

he cannot rid himself, even if he would. It has been well said by Carlyle that every man can attain to the elevation of the Prophet by seeking truth ; but whereas the ordinary man is able to reach that plane by strength of will and enormous effort, the Prophet can stand on no other by reason of his very nature.

Secondly, the Prophet is an *extremist*. He concentrates his whole heart and mind on his ideal, in which he finds the goal of life, and to which he is determined to make the whole world do service, without the smallest exception. There is in his soul a complete, ideal world ; and on that pattern he labours to reform the external world of reality. He has a clear conviction that so things *must* be, and no more is needed to make him demand that so they *shall* be. He can accept no excuse, can consent to no compromise, can never cease thundering his passionate denunciations, even if the whole universe is against him.

From these two fundamental characteristics there results a third, which is a combination of the other two : namely, the supremacy of absolute *righteousness* in the Prophet's soul, in his every word and action. As a man of truth he cannot help being also a man of justice or righteousness ; for what is righteousness but truth in action ? And as an extremist he cannot subordinate righteousness (any more than he can subordinate truth) to any irrelevant end ; he cannot desert righteousness from motives of temporary expediency, even at the bidding of love or pity. Thus the Prophet's righteousness is absolute, knowing no restriction either on the side of social necessities or on that of human feelings.

The Prophet, then, is in this position : on the one hand, he cannot altogether reform the world according to his desire ; on the other hand, he cannot cheat himself and shut his eyes to its defects. Hence it is impossible for him ever to be at peace with the actual life in which his days are spent. There is thus a grain of truth in the popular idea of the Prophet as above all

a man who predicts the future ; for, in truth, the whole world of the Prophet consists of his heart's vision of what is to come, of " the latter end of days." This is his delight and his comfort whenever the cup of sorrows is full to the brim, and he has no strength left to pour out his soul in bitter outcry against the evil that he sees around him.

But just as the Prophet will not bow to the world, so the world will not bow to him, will not accept his influence immediately and directly. This influence must first pass through certain channels in which it becomes adapted to the conditions of life. Then only can it affect mankind. These channels are human channels. They are men who cannot rise to the Prophet's elevation, and have no sympathy with his extremism, but are none the less nearer to him in spirit than the mass of men, and are capable of being influenced by him up to a certain point. These men are the *Priests* of the prophetic ideal. They stand between the Prophet and the world, and transmit his influence by devious ways, adapting their methods to the needs of each particular time, and not insisting that the message shall descend on the workaday world in all its pristine purity.

Thus I picture the Prophet in his purest form.[1] Such, in essentials, were all the true Prophets of Israel, from Hosea and Amos to Jeremiah and Ezekiel ; but the type is most perfectly realised in the ideal picture of " the lord of the Prophets."

When Moses first leaves the schoolroom and goes out into the world, he is at once brought face to face with a violation of justice, and unhesitatingly he takes the side of the injured. Here at the outset is revealed the eternal struggle between the Prophet and the world.

" An Egyptian smiting a Hebrew," the strong treading scornfully on the weak—this every-day occur-

[1] See Selected Essays by Ahad Ha'am [p. 125].

rence is his first experience. The Prophet's indignation is aroused and he helps the weaker. Then "two Hebrews strove together"—two brothers, both weak, both slaves of Pharaoh: and yet they fight each other. Once more the Prophet's sense of justice compels him, and he meddles in a quarrel which is not his. But this time he discovers that it is no easy matter to fight the battle of justice; that the world is stronger than himself, and that he who stands against the world does so at his peril. Yet this experience does not make him prudent or cautious. His zeal for justice drives him from his country; and as soon as he reaches another haunt of men, while he is still sitting by the well outside the city, before he has had time to find a friend and shelter, he hears once more the cry of outraged justice, and runs immediately to its aid. This time the wranglers are not Hebrews, but foreigners and strangers. But what of that? The Prophet makes no distinction between man and man, only between right and wrong. He sees strong shepherds trampling on the rights of weak women—"and Moses stood up and helped them."

This is the sum of our knowledge about Moses' life till the time when he stood before Pharaoh—and he was then "eighty years old." Of all that long stretch of years, and what happened in them, tradition takes no account, because they were only the preface, only the preparation for the real work of the Prophet. If an exception was made in the case of these three events, which happened to the Prophet at the outset of his life's journey, and if we see that all three have the same characteristic, that of the Prophet standing up against the world in the name of righteousness, we may believe that the object of the tradition was to throw this conflict into relief, and to show how the Prophet displayed the essential qualities of his kind from the very first. We may therefore infer that throughout the whole of that period, in all his wanderings, he never ceased to fight the battle of justice, until

the day came when he was to be the saviour of his people, and teach the world justice, not for his own time merely, but for all eternity.

That great moment dawned in the wilderness, far away from the turmoil of the world. The Prophet's soul is weary of his ceaseless battle, and he would fain rest in peace. He turns his back on men for the shepherd's life, and takes his sheep into the wilderness. There " he came to the mountain of God, unto Horeb." But even here there is no rest for him. He feels that he has not yet fulfilled his mission ; a secret force in his heart urges him on, saying, " What doest thou here ? Go thou, work and fight : for to that end wast thou created." He would like to disregard this voice, but cannot. The Prophet hears " the voice of God " in his heart, whether he will or not : " and if I say, I will not make mention of him. . . . . then there is in mine heart as it were a *burning fire* shut up in my bones, and I am weary with forbearing, and I cannot contain."

And the Prophet remembers that in his youth, at his first encounter with life, the same fire burnt in his heart and gave him no rest. From that day to this he has done all in his power to make justice supreme in the world : and the fire is still burning. The best of his years, the flower of his strength, have been consumed in the battle ; and victory is not his. Now old age has come upon him ; yet a little, and he will be sapless as a withered and barren tree—even like this bush before him. Can he still find new means of reaching his goal ? Can his old age succeed where his youth has failed ? What is there to do that he has not done ? Why should the fire still burn within him, still disturb his soul's peace ?

Suddenly he hears the inner " voice of God "—the voice that he knows so well—calling to him from some forgotten corner of his heart :

" I am the God of thy father . . . . I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in

Egypt . . . . Come now, therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

"The God of his father," "the affliction of his people"—how can he have forgotten all this till now? Faithfully has he served the God of the Universe, fighting a hero's battle for universal justice. In Midian, in every country in which he set foot, he has striven always to deliver the oppressed from the oppressor, has preached always truth and peace and charity. But the God of his father he has forgotten; his people he has not remembered; the affliction wherewith the Egyptians afflict his people—of that he has taken no thought.

Now a new hope springs up in the Prophet's heart, and grows stronger each moment. With this hope, he feels, his strength increases, and the days of his youth are renewed. Now he knows the right way to the goal which he has striven after all his life. Hitherto he has consumed his strength among strangers, who looked on him as an alien even after he had spent years among them; who took no account of him, and paid no heed to his teaching; who would not believe him even if he called on the name of their own gods. But now, now he will go to his own brethren, his own people, and will speak to them in the name of the God of his fathers and theirs. They will know and respect him; they will listen to all that he says, will listen and obey: and the sovereignty of righteousness, hitherto nothing more than his heart's ideal will be established in the world by this his people, which he will bring forth out of the house of bondage.

Under the spell of this noble idea the Prophet forgets for a moment all the obstacles in his path, and in fancy sees himself already in Egypt among his people. To Pharaoh, indeed, he will not go alone. He knows beforehand that such a man as he, unskilled to speak smooth words, cannot bend the hearts of

kings to his desire. But he will approach first of all his own people ; he will assemble the " elders of Israel," men who are known in the royal house ; to them first he will reveal the great tidings, that God has visited them. And these men, the flower of the people, will understand him and " hearken to his voice." They will go with him to Pharaoh, and give God's message to the king in a language which he understands.

But how if even they, the elders of Israel, " will not hearken to his voice," " will not believe " in his mission ?

In that case he knows what to do. Not for nothing was he brought up in Pharaoh's house on the knees of the magicians. " Enchantments " are an abomination to him ; but what can he do if the " elders of Israel " believe only in such things, and are open to no other appeal ?

Even the " sons of God " have been known to fall from Heaven to earth ; and even the Prophet has his moments of relapse, when the spirit of prophecy deserts him, and his mortal elements drag him down into the mire of the world. But only for a moment can the Prophet cease to be what he ought to be, and needs must be—a man of truth. Scarcely has Moses conceived this idea of gaining credence by means of magic enchantments, when the Prophet in him rises up in arms against this unclean thought. Never ! Since first he began to hear " the voice of God " his tongue has been a holy instrument, the outer vesture of that Divine voice within him ; but " a man of words," a man whose words are only means to the attainment of his desires, not genuinely connected with his thought —such a man he has never been " heretofore," nor will ever be. That is a price which he will not pay even for the redemption of his people. If there is no way but through enchantments, then let the redemption be achieved by others, and let him alone in his spotless truth, alone in the wilderness :

"Oh, Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom Thou wilt send."

But it is not easy for the Prophet to remain in the wilderness. The burning fire which has just roused all his spiritual forces to action has not yet been quelled ; it will give him no rest till he find some way to carry out his thought.

So, at last, the Prophet finds the necessary "channel" through which his influence shall reach the people. He has a brother in Egypt, a man of position, a Levite, who knows how to shape his words to the needs of the time and the place. His brother will need no enchantments to gain him allegiance. He, the "Priest" of the future, will go with the Prophet to the elders and to the king himself. Nay, he will know how to find a way into the hearts of all of them :

"And thou shalt speak unto him . . . and he shall be thy spokesman unto the people : and it shall come to pass, that he shall be to thee a mouth, and thou shalt be to him as God."

So the *immediate* goal is reached. Pharaoh and all his host lie at the bottom of the Red Sea, and Moses stands at the head of a free people, leading them to the land of their ancestors.

"Then sang Moses . . . ." In this hour of happiness his heart overflows with emotion, and pours itself out in song. He does not know that he is still at the beginning of his journey ; he does not know that the real task, the most difficult task, has still to be commenced. Pharaoh is gone, but his work remains ; the master has ceased to be master, but the slaves have not ceased to be slaves. A people trained for generations in the house of bondage cannot cast off in an instant the effects of that training and become truly free, even when the chains have been struck off.

But the Prophet believes in the power of his ideal. He is convinced that the ideal which he is destined to give to his people will have sufficient force to expel

the taint of slavery, and to imbue this slave-people with a new spirit of strength and upward striving, equal to all the demands of its lofty mission.

Then the Prophet gathers his people at the foot of the mountain, opens the innermost heavens before them, and shows them the God of their fathers in a new form, in all His universal grandeur.

" For all the earth is Mine," so speaks the voice of the God of Israel " out of the midst of the fire." Hitherto you have believed, in common with all other nations, that every people and every country has its own god, all-powerful within his boundaries, and that these gods wage war on one another and conquer one another, like the nations that serve them. But it is not so. There is no such thing as a God of Israel and a different God of Egypt ; there is one God, who was, is, and shall be : He is Lord of *all* the earth, and Ruler over *all* the nations. And it is this universal God who is the God of your fathers. The whole world is His handiwork, and all men are created in His image ; but you, the children of His chosen Abraham, He has singled out to be His peculiar people, to be " a kingdom of priests and an holy nation," to sanctify His name in the world and to be an example to mankind in your individual and in your corporate life, which are to be based on new foundations, on the spirit of Truth and Righteousness.

" Justice, justice shalt thou follow." " Keep thee far from a false matter." You shall not respect the strong ; " and a stranger shalt thou not wrong. . . . Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child." But neither shall you wrest justice on the side of the weak : " Neither shalt thou favour a poor man in his cause." The guiding rule of your lives shall be neither hatred and jealousy, nor yet love and pity, for all alike pervert the view and bias the judgment. " Justice, justice "—that alone shall be your rule.

" Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire " such lofty and majestic

words ? And the nation that has heard this message, though it may have been sunk for centuries in the morass of slavery and degradation, how can it fail to rise out of the depths, and feel in its innermost soul the purifying light that streams in upon it ?

So thinks the Prophet ; and the people confirm his belief, as they cry ecstatically, with one voice, " All that the Lord hath spoken we will do."

So the Prophet leaves the camp in peace of mind, and withdraws into solitude on the top of the mountain, there to perfect and complete the law of righteousness. But before he has been many days out of sight the Egyptian bondman rears his head, and in a moment overturns the dream-castle which the Prophet has built on the foundation of his faith in the power of the ideal. " The voice of God " is drowned by " the noise of the people as they shouted " ; and the Priest, whom the Prophet trusted, who was his mouthpiece before Pharaoh and the people, this very Priest is carried away by the mob, and makes them " gods " after their own heart, and builds an altar . . . . This, in his view, is what the hour demands : and the Priest is above all a man of the hour.

The Prophet's grief knows no bounds. All his work, all his visions of his people's glorious mission, all the hope which comforted him in his arduous path, all is vanished into nothing. He is seized by impotent despair. " The tablets of the Covenant " fall from his hand and are broken ; his faith in himself and his work is shaken. Now he sees how hard it is to create a " peculiar people " out of such warped material, and for one moment he thinks of abandoning this " obstinate people," and entrusting his tablets to the remnant who are faithful to his covenant. They will observe his law, and win over little by little the best of mankind, till they become " a great nation " ; and he will return to his shepherd's life in the wilderness.

But the Prophet is not a Priest : it is not for him to bow to circumstances without a struggle, and to

change his way of thought at their bidding. The first impulse passes away, and the Prophet returns to his mission, and resolves to go forward, come what may. Now he realises the hard task that lies before him. He no longer believes in a sudden revolution; he knows that signs and wonders and visions of God can arouse a momentary enthusiasm, but cannot create a new heart, cannot uproot and implant feelings and inclinations with any stability or permanence. So he summons all his patience to the task of bearing the troublesome burden of his people and training it by slow steps till it is fit for its mission.

Thus the first period passes away. The Prophet teaches, trains, bears, and forgives, borne up by the hope of seeing the fruits of his labour at no distant day, when his people's mission will be fulfilled in their own land.

And then comes the incident of the spies. Here is a nation on its way to conquer a country by force, and there build up its own distinctive national life, which is to be an example to the world: and at the first unfavourable report despair sets in, and the glorious future is forgotten. Even the Prophet's heart fails him at this evidence of utter, fathomless degradation.

Moses now sees, then, that his last hope is groundless. Not even education will avail to make this degraded mob capable of a lofty mission. Straightway the Prophet decrees extinction on his generation, and resolves to remain in the wilderness forty years, till all that generation be consumed, and its place be taken by a new generation, born and bred in freedom, and trained from childhood under the influence of the Law which it is to observe in the land of its future.

It requires unusual courage to go out boldly to meet danger, to fall single-handed on an enemy of vastly superior strength, to plunge into a stormy sea. But far greater heroism is demanded of the man

who goes about consciously and deliberately to tear out of his heart a splendid hope, which has been the very breath of his life; to stop half-way when all his feelings tumultuously impel him on towards the goal which seemed so near. With such heroism has this Hebrew tradition endowed its Superman, the prince of its Prophets. In vain do his followers, now conscious of their error, urge him to take up the work again, and lead them to their inheritance; in vain is their entreaty, "Lo, we be here, and will go up!" The Prophet has decreed, and will not, nay cannot, retract. He is convinced that "this evil congregation" can be of no use for his purpose, and no entreaty will induce the Prophet to act against his convictions. He mourns with them and makes their grief his own; but for their supplications he has one stern answer, "Go not up, for the Lord is not among you."

So the Prophet remains in the wilderness, buries his own generation and trains up a new one. Year after year passes, and he never grows weary of repeating to this growing generation the laws of righteousness that must guide its life in the land of its future; never tires of recalling the glorious past in which these laws were fashioned. The past and the future are the Prophet's whole life, each completing the other. In the present he sees nothing but a wilderness, a life far removed from his ideal; and therefore he looks before and after. He lives in the future world of his vision, and seeks strength in the past out of which that vision-world is quarried.

Forty years are gone, and the new generation is about to emerge from its vagabond life in the wilderness, and take up the broken thread of the national task, when the Prophet dies, and another man assumes the leadership, and brings the people to its land.

Why does the Prophet die? Why is it not vouchsafed to him to complete his work himself? Tradition, as we know, gives no sufficient reason.

But tradition recognised, with unerring instinct, that so it needs must be. When the time comes for the ideal to be embodied in practice, the Prophet can no longer stand at the head; he must give place to another. The reason is that from that moment there begins a new period, a period in which prophecy is dumb, a period of those half-measures and compromises which are essential to the battle of life. In this period reality assumes gradually a form very different from that of the Prophet's vision; and so it is better for him to die than to witness this change. "He shall see the land before him, but he shall not go thither." He has brought his people to the border, fitted them for their future, and given them a noble ideal to be their lodestar in time of trouble, their comfort and their salvation; the rest is for other men, who are more skilled to compromise with life. Let them do what they will do and achieve what they will achieve, be it much or little. In any case they will not achieve all that the Prophet wished, and their way will not be his way.

As for him, the Prophet, he dies, as he has lived, in his faith. All the evil that he has seen has been powerless to quench his hope for the future, or dim the brightness of the ideal that illumined his path from afar. He dies with gladness on his face, and with words of comfort for the latter days on his lips: dies, as tradition says, "in a kiss," embracing, as it were, the ideal to which he has consecrated his life, and for which he has toiled and suffered till his last breath.

When Heine wanted to describe the greatness of the prince of Hebrew poets, Jehudah Halevi, he said that "he was born with a kiss." But that idea is foreign to the Jewish spirit. When the national tradition wishes to describe the greatness of the prince of Prophets, it makes him die, not come to life, with a kiss. That death-kiss is the crown of a work completed and a duty fulfilled to the uttermost, of a

life whose burden has been borne from first to last with the steadfastness of a sea-girt rock, which flinches not nor bows, but bears unmoved the onset of the devouring waves.

"The creator," I have said, "creates in his own image." And in truth, our people has but expressed *itself*, at its highest, in this picture of Moses. Well have the Cabbalists said that "Moses is reincarnated in every age." Some hint of Moses has illumined the dark life of our people, like a spark, in every generation. This needs no lengthy proof. We have but to open our Prayer Book, and we shall see almost on every page how constant has been the striving after the realisation of the prophetic ideal in all its world-embracing breadth, constant throughout the blackest periods of the Jew's history, when his life has been most precarious and persecution has driven him from country to country. Israel has never lived in the present. The present, with its evil and its wickedness, has always filled us with anguish, indignation, and bitterness. But just as constantly have we been inspired with brilliant hopes for the future, and an ineradicable faith in the coming triumph of the good and the right; and for these hopes and that faith we have always sought and found support in the history of our past, whereon our imagination has brooded, weaving all manner of fair dreams, so as to make the past a kind of mirror of the future. Our very Hebrew language, the garment of the Jewish spirit, has no present tense, but only a past and a future. The question has been much debated, whether the fundamental characteristic of the Jewish spirit is optimism or pessimism; and extreme views have been propounded on both sides. But all such discussion is futile. The Jew is both optimist and pessimist; but his pessimism has reference to the present, his optimism to the future. This was true of the Prophets, and it is true of the people of the Prophets.

There has, indeed, been one short period in modern Jewish history when Israel grew utterly weary of toil and trouble, and began to long for solace in the present, taking pleasure in the fleeting hour, as other nations do, and demanding no more of life than what it can give. And when once this longing was aroused, and became Israel's ideal (despite its fundamental opposition to the prophetic outlook), the prophetic characteristic at once manifested itself here also: the ideal was pursued to extreme lengths, without any regard to the obstacles that lay in the way of its attainment. The Jews of that period had no pity on the vision of a great future, to which their ancestors clung throughout history. They wiped it out at a single stroke, as soon as its abandonment seemed to be a necessary step to the attainment of the ideal of to-day. And with the future the past necessarily went, seeing that it had no meaning except as a mirror of the future. But we all know the end of the story. The ideal of to-day was not attained; and all the labour of that period, its attempt to destroy one world and build another, left nothing but ruin and the bitterness that comes of wasted effort.

But this was a mere passing phase, a sort of fainting-fit, a temporary loss of consciousness. The prophetic spirit cannot be crushed, except for a time. It comes to life again, and masters the Prophet in his own despite. So, too, the prophetic people regained consciousness in its own despite, and we see once again some beginning of the "reincarnation of Moses." The Spirit which called Moses thousands of years ago and sent him on his mission, against his own will, now calls again the generation of to-day, saying,

"And that which cometh into your mind shall not be at all; in that ye say, we will be as the nations . . as I live, saith the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand . . . . will I be king over you."

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